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ABSTRACT

School districts throughout Pennsylvania are attempting to implement new state regulations, including the establishment of new standards for high school graduation. As school districts consider standards, they should also make sure that all students have the opportunity to meet those standards. This includes insuring that all students leave third grade reading well enough to profit from subsequent instruction. The General Assembly also has a responsibility to make sure that all districts have the resources to provide all students with the opportunity to learn the skills needed for success in school and the workplace. Extra funding that is needed in high poverty schools could become part of the state's new foundation supplements. The idea of foundation financial support of foundation-skills development, as defined, might help insure adequate funding. Casting the need for foundation support of foundation skills as a serious economic problem may help motivate the public to solve it. Two tables illustrate the discussion. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

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Standards for a Firm Foundation

by

William W. Cooley

University of Pittsburgh

April, 1994

The purpose of this series of papers is to contribute to a more informed debate about critical policy issues facing Pennsylvania's public schools. This PEPS series draws upon a data base that has been established here at the University of Pittsburgh under the direction of William Cooley in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and with funding support from the Howard Heinz Endowment and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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Executive Summary

Throughout Pennsylvania, school districts are struggling to implement the new Chapter 5 regulations, including the establishment of standards for high school graduation. This paper argues that as school districts consider standards, they should also make sure that all students have the opportunity to meet those standards. This includes insuring that all students leave third-grade reading well enough to profit from subsequent instruction. That is not the case in many schools in the state today.

Similarly, the General Assembly has a responsibility to make sure that all districts have the resources needed to provide all students the opportunity to learn the skills needed for success in school and the workplace. A problem is that the districts with the most difficult educational task often have inadequate resources to meet that challenge. The notion of foundation financial support for foundation skills development, as defined in this paper, might help insure adequate funding.

Many people in Pennsylvania are concerned about the quality of the potential labor pool. Each year there are thousands of state youth who drop out of high school, who remain unemployed and become a drain on our economy and public services. Perhaps casting the need for foundation support for foundation skills as a serious economic problem will help to mobilize the public will to solve it.

The Foundation Skills

With all the enthusiasm today for higher order thinking skills, it is often forgotten that most problem solving situations require the problem solver to also have mastery of the foundation skills, commonly known as the basic skills. Excellent reminders of this are in the reports from the U. S. Department of Labor issued by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, referred to as the SCANS reports (1991, 1992). Those ambitious reports made it quite clear that the basic skills of reading, writing, and computation, which they referred to as the foundation skills, are central to the development of the competencies needed in today's workplace.

The state-wide test called TELLS, the Test of Essential Learning and Literacy Skills, which was administered to all Pennsylvania students in grades 3, 5 and 8 from 1985 to the spring of 1991, provides evidence regarding the degree to which students have not been mastering the foundation skills. TELLS became controversial when it began to be misused as an accountability measure. However, one thing the TELLS test did rather well was provide a sense of the degree to which students were leaving grades 3, 5 and 8 without having mastered basic reading and mathematics skills, those foundation skills that are essential for subsequent learning and employability. It seems useful to learn what we can from the TELLS assessments about the degree to which students

have not been mastering the foundation skills, and what might be done about it.

The TELLS results include test scores for both reading and math, for all students in grades 3, 5 and 8, for a six year period. Examining these extensive testing results, an important pattern emerges: low performance in the reading test at grade 3 results in low performance in subsequent grades. **If students leave third grade without having learned to read well enough to learn through reading, they are going to have trouble during the rest of their schooling.** They are seriously at risk of school failure.

The primary grades (grades 1 to 3) is where all children can and must learn to read. After grade 3 the curriculum shifts from instruction with an emphasis on learning to read, to instruction that requires the ability to read in order to learn other subjects. This is not to say that all students can learn to read equally well, but programs have been developed and implemented in which all students do learn to read well enough at the end of third grade to read what is expected of them in fourth grade and beyond. **As districts consider standards for student performance, it makes good sense to start with a reading standard for the end of grade 3 that will provide all students with the opportunity to learn in subsequent grades.** There will always be some students that will score low on a norm referenced reading test, but all students can meet

a third grade reading standard that will greatly reduce their risk of school failure.

Students begin first grade with a wide range of skills that affect how easily they will learn to read. The emphasis upon Goal 1 of the national educational goals (all children will begin school ready to learn) is important, but no matter how much effort is put into improving the readiness skills for all children, some are going to require more intensive instruction than others. **It is critical to realize that all children can develop adequate reading skills by the end of third grade if the program is designed to make that possible**. Examples of such programs are those designed by Slavin et al. (1993), Comer (1988) and Levin (1987).

The students who do not perform well on a third grade reading test are not, of course, randomly distributed about the state. Table 1 reports the thirteen districts with more than 25% of their third graders scoring below the minimum considered essential for subsequent success in school. Table 1 also shows the twelve districts with fewer than 2.5% of their students scoring below that minimum. The range of performance is considerable. A few districts had all of their students reading well by the end of third grade, while in Philadelphia almost half of the students had very poorly developed reading skills.

The two districts in Table 1 from York County illustrate the problem. In the York City school district, 28% of the students had

Table 1

School Districts Ordered by Grade 3 Reading Performance

Fewer than 2.5% of students below minimum	Percent
CLARION	.0
WESTMONT HILLTOP	.0
HARMONY	.0
CAMP HILL	.0
UNIONVILL-CHADDS FORD	.0
SUSQUEHANNA TWP	.6
YORK SUBURBAN	1.3
PETERS	1.9
MOUNT LEBANON	2.2
OSWAYO VALLEY	2.3
MECHANICSBURG	2.4
WALLINGFORD-SWARTHMORE	2.4

More than 25% of students below minimum	Percent
LANCASTER	25.4
ALLENTOWN	26.8
YORK CITY	28.2
ALIQUIPPA	28.3
AUSTIN	29.4
DUQUESNE	29.9
PITTSBURGH	30.2
MOUNT UNION	30.2
STO-ROX	34.2
PANTHER VALLEY	36.5
CHESTER UPLAND	37.3
HARRISBURG	37.5
PHILADELPHIA	47.9

inadequate reading skills when they left third grade, while in the York Suburban district it was only about 1%. But the York City teachers have a much more difficult educational task (see Cooley, 1993) than do

the York Suburban teachers. In York City, 25% of the students come from poverty homes (AFDC), as compared to 1% in Suburban York. The per capita income in the York Suburban district is $17,000, while in York City it is $7,700. There are 15 students per teacher in Suburban, and 20 students per teacher in City. Teachers average $35,000 per year in the City, but average over $40,000 in Suburban, where the job is much easier.

This comparison of reading performance in these two districts does not necessarily indicate that the York Suburban schools are more effective than the York City schools in teaching reading. **But what can be said is that the primary grades reading program in the York City schools is inadequate for the task it has.** It is clearly possible for all children from poverty homes to learn the basic skills, but it cannot be done by business as usual. It will require a greater effort and different strategies than those currently in place. Some of that effort will have to come from the state, as least in terms of resources. The tax effort (in equalized mills) in York City is 29 dollars per $1000 of market value, well above the state average of 22, while in Suburban York it is 18 mills, well below the average district. So while the taxpayers in York City are taxed at a much higher rate, York Suburban is able to employ more teachers and pay them higher salaries because their tax base is so much larger.

There has been lots of confusion about how poverty should be taken into account when low test scores are found in high poverty schools. **The low socio-economic status of the students being served by a school is not an excuse for low scores in that school, but rather shows that a greater effort is needed if all students are to have an opportunity to succeed in school.** A move to standards is a move toward describing what all students can and should be able to do. It is a move away from blaming the kids, or blaming the parents, or blaming the school, or blaming the state for inadequate funding. It is a move toward finding solutions that will allow success for all students, success on achievable standards.

Table 1 also shows that the Philadelphia School District has the highest percentage of third graders below the minimum. This is particularly disconcerting because it is the largest school district in the state. In fact, the two largest districts (Philadelphia and Pittsburgh) together account for 36% of the students below minimum in the state (yet serve only 14% of the state's students). While it is important to recognize and deal with the poverty problems associated with the small, poor communities in the state, the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh schools represent the greatest challenge in terms of sheer numbers of students who are having a negative impact upon the quality of the workforce.

When people notice something like poor math performance at

eighth grade, there is a tendency to move in with a remedial math program. Or if people notice that the students doing poorly in school have low self-esteem, they want to add courses that might enhance self esteem. It is very tempting to try to correct a deficiency by dealing with it directly rather than trying to identify the more fundamental problem. It seems clear from the data that the most fundamental educational problem we have is the fact that large numbers of students are leaving third grade not reading as well as they need to for subsequent success in school. An emphasis on foundation skills development in the primary grades represents a commitment to prevention of school failure, as opposed to continual remediation.

As solutions are sought, it is also important to recognize that only some schools have a serious reading problem. Looking at individual schools over the six-year period, one can identify those schools that have consistently low third-grade reading scores. Table 2 reports the frequency distribution for the 1,913 elementary schools in the state that served third graders in 1991. For example, nine schools had more than 70 percent of their students not reading well at the end of grade 3, and in one of those schools more than 4 out of 5 of the students performed below the minimum needed for subsequent learning in school. **The third graders in those nine schools have been performing poorly every year, for as long as results have been available. Repeated testing did not**

Table 2

Reading Performance for Third Graders

Percent of Students Below Minimum	Number of Schools	Percent of Schools
0 to 9	868	45
10 to 19	627	33
20 to 29	195	40
30 to 39	83	4
40 to 49	54	3
50 to 59	41	2
60 to 69	36	2
70 to 79	8	0
Over 80%	1	0
Total Schools	1913	

[e.g., as shown in the first row, 45% of the schools (868 out of 1913 schools) had fewer than 10% of their third graders below the minimum required reading performance]

solve the problem! But the tests did reveal a situation that is not inevitable and should not be tolerated, especially not by a General Assembly charged with providing a "thorough and efficient" system of public schools.

This is not to argue that all would be well if only all students learned to read well by the end of third grade. Although such skills may not be sufficient for subsequent success in school, they are clearly necessary. Until that is recognized, students will continue to leave

school in large numbers because they are unable to perform the basic functions that school expects of them. The thousands of youth in our state that have dropped out of school and have no job are a great cost to the Commonwealth, both the direct cost of the social services they may require and the indirect cost of their being largely unemployable.

What's to be done?

Schools in which most of the students are from low income homes have the most difficult educational task. Such schools require more resources if this challenge is to be met. King (1994) provides a very helpful summary of what those additional costs might be for three of the programs that have proven successful for at risk students (the programs of Comer, Levin, and Slavin). All three programs have the type of primary grades reading emphasis needed in schools serving high concentrations of poverty students. The additional costs range from about $100 to $1300 per student, depending upon the resources already available in the school and the type of program adopted.

Not all schools have serious problems in teaching beginning reading, just some schools. A place to begin would be to require those school districts in which most of the children leave third grade with inadequate reading skills to develop a plan that will change that unacceptable status quo. The plan would establish the nature and level of effort required to change that situation. It would provide the school

staff and parents some viable, programmatic options and the support needed to implement the option selected by the school. This latter point is important. It would not be wise for the state, or the school district for that matter, to decide upon a specific program (e.g., Comer's) and require all poverty schools to implement it. The professionals in the school must have the opportunity to examine program options and select the one that makes sense to them and their school.

Unfortunately, the new Pennsylvania State Assessment System (1991), defined as part of the new regulations that require all districts to develop strategic plans, is testing reading at grades 5, 8 and 11, but not at grade 3. The State Board of Education might wish to return to a third grade reading test if they want to provide a school-based assessment system that will be helpful to districts in this aspect of strategic planning, and if they want to make sure that districts that need to address this primary grades reading problem are doing so.

The extra funding needed in these high poverty schools could become part of the state's new foundation supplements. The notion of insuring adequate funding has already been established as a clear state responsibility. Providing the funding needed for all schools to achieve standards of proficiency in reading would seem to be more easily justified than some arbitrarily defined base funding level (e.g. $4700 per student), a level which really describes what the state budget makers

think they can afford, rather than adequate funding for foundation skills development for all students. Clune (1993) provides an excellent discussion of the recent increase in efforts to define adequate, foundation funding in school finance reform.

If school districts do not respond to this call for action, then more drastic steps may be necessary. For example, Commonwealth Court Judge Doris Smith (1994) recently ordered the School District of Philadelphia to develop a plan that would "incorporate specific and reasonable academic achievement goals for students in racially isolated minority schools," and develop the means to achieve those goals. Those racially isolated minority schools were among the schools at the very bottom of the distribution of schools in Table 2. So this court order may result in at least one district taking appropriate action.

Another approach to action is the recent request for proposals issued by the Wilkinsburg Board of Education (1994). That school district has decided to let someone else try to make one of their elementary schools work. The board concluded that the children in this high poverty school were not receiving the education they needed, and the school board is willing to turn the school over, together with the $1.8 million currently being spent on that school, to an independent contractor with the best ideas on how to turn that school around.

If students do not acquire an adequate mastery of reading during

the first three grades they become seriously at risk of not completing school. The chances are they become part of the 25,000 young people who drop out of Pennsylvania's public schools each year. They become part of the 36,000 youth, ages 16 to 19, who have left school and are unemployed (according to the U.S. 1990 Census for Pennsylvania).

Of course schools have a broader purpose than to prepare youth for the workplace, but one function they clearly have is to provide those skills that are essential for subsequent learning. Perhaps recognizing that many state youth are not learning those foundation skills, and that this represents an economic problem, will produce the public and political will needed to solve it. It has been difficult to rally the citizens of the affluent suburbs to worry about low test scores in the less affluent communities. After all, their own children are getting a good education. But enlightened self-interest suggests that the employers who live in those affluent communities need to worry about the quality of education their future employees are receiving. They also need to worry about the costs of having large numbers of state youth who are essentially unemployable. Perhaps a focused effort of the type describe here, one that demonstrates what is possible and what is required, can make a difference.

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